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ABSTRACT

Studies of the creation and management of impressions have advanced rapidly in recent years. However, relatively little empirical information has been provided about the processes by which impressions are created and managed in routine interaction and about the range of matters about which impressions are created. The excessive use of internal cognitive mechanisms leads research efforts away from a concern with the social and cultural contexts of action. Impression management research should capitalize on its theoretical emphasis on observable social processes, and should be expanded to include management of impressions about relationships, about fluctuating states of feeling, and about intention and willingness to interact. Situational analysis may provide a needed link to cultural considerations. (JAC)

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Situated Action and the Management of Impression

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SITUATED ACTION AND THE MANAGEMENT OF IMPRESSION

Study of the creation and management of impressions has advanced rapidly over the last several years, thanks in large part to some of the very people on this symposium. It is especially pleasing to see the contributions and challenges it has made to such central topics in social psychology as attitude formation and change (Cialdini, Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, esp. 380-382; Jellison, 1980) and attribution (Jellison & Green, 1981; see also review in Schlenker, 1980). However, the work to date has provided relatively little empirical information about the processes by which impressions are created and managed in routine interaction and about the range of matters about which impressions are created. The focus has been largely on character impressions produced during brief encounters in experimental contexts with which the participants are unfamiliar. But impressions actually are created, modulated and corrected continuously, sometimes on a moment-to-moment basis, and in enduring relationships as well as brief encounters. Furthermore, impressions emerge about a person's short-term states of feeling or intention as well as long-term character, and they also occur with respect to the state of a relationship and the tone and temporal duration of an interchange. And finally, impressions usually emerge in fairly familiar situations, where sequences of action run off rather habitually within a framework of roles and guiding rules and norms. I think that the ultimate contribution of the study of impression management to the understanding of social behavior will be severely and unnecessarily limited if we do not expand the range of matters with respect to which we study impressions, and if we do not observe and analyze the processes by which impressions are created and modulated.

The narrowness of our focus derives, I believe, from some excesses in the conventional practice of experimental social psychology in this country.

These excesses include, first, an excessive reliance on reinforcement, reward/cost ratios, and other overly simple forms of hedonics; second, an excessive reliance on internal cognitive mechanisms, especially from an observer's perspective; third, an excessive focus on the individual as the source of social events; fourth, an excessive reliance on causal descriptions; and fifth, an excessive use of experimental procedures. Considering some of these just briefly, the biological status of reinforcement as a mechanism is unclear (Bolles, 1972), especially for complex social behavior; and even if it were operative it would not be particularly useful as an explanation because the substance of what is valued or what is reinforcing in ordinary interaction is grounded in the culture and situation. Therefore, it still would be necessary - as it is today - to investigate the cultural values and situational opportunities that are pertinent to the behavior of interest.

The excessive explanatory use of internal, cognitive mechanisms which operate as observing and directing homunculi is similarly troublesome: It leads us away from a concern with the social and cultural contexts of action, including such matters as why the given situations and choices are available and who is benefitted by their being sought or avoided (see Sampson, 1980, for a strong form of this argument; also see Gergen & Morawski, 1980; Harré, 1980). It also directs our attention away from the first person or subjective perspective and assumes the existence of a third person, reflective component as a ubiquitous feature of human action. The ubiquity of a third person, reflective component is extremely unlikely (Ginsburg, 1980a; also 1981, pp. 15-17; Kahneman, 1973, p. 131, regarding consciousness, a closely related issue; Kelley, 1980), and the time requirements for performance based on reflective thought do not match the real-time rapidity of most social interaction.

The excessive reliance on a causal vocabulary of explanation is especially pervasive and troublesome (see Ossorio, 1978; or the summary interpretation of his complex argument in Ginsburg, 1980b). It has the familiar "if X then Y" form and is a special case of the more general category of instrumental descriptions, in which we specify a set of steps by which we accomplish some end. This is especially appropriate when we wish to describe unilateral actions by which we can manipulate the world. Such descriptions have considerable practical utility, but they are not a necessary or even preferable form of scientific talk, and they often are insufficiently descriptive and may be quite inaccurate. On the other hand, the causal vocabulary is compatible with manipulative experimentation, and it is the excessive use of the two in conjunction that poses the greatest stumbling block to advances in our understanding. Well designed experiments constrain subjects from exercising some of the very capacities and skills which we are interested in studying, especially by limiting their opportunity to choose or manipulate the situation or negotiate with the experimenter (Snyder, 1979, 119-120; also see Ginsburg, 1979; Mixon, 1979).

There are several steps that I think we should take to circumvent the obstacles that our conventional practices will create for us. First, we should acknowledge that impression creation and modulation is inherent in any and all interaction, and we should not waste time merely demonstrating its existence by experiment. Second, we should take the interactional episode (Harré & Secord, 1972) or interchange (Cairns, 1979) as the object of analysis, and examine impression activities within it. This means we should identify the matters about which impressions are formed as well as analyze the real-time processes by which they are negotiated and achieved. Finally, we must acknowledge that any and all human action is situated, and to understand the actions, we must understand the situations within which they are known or believed to occur. Taking these steps will shift our emphasis away from virtually exclu-

sive reliance on predictive, input/output studies to the structural analysis of completed episodes of action (cf. Duncan & Fiske, 1977; Ginsburg, 1980c; Harré & Secord, 1972) and will require analysis of the situations containing those episodes.

In other words, we would supplement our conventional experimental approach with studies in which we decompose completed social episodes and studies in which we locate episodes within their situations of occurrence.

Now I'd like to give some illustrative examples. Then I'll tie them together and link them to more general lines of work in my concluding remarks. As you'll see by the examples, impression creation and management can be studied at many different levels.

First, consider the importance of taking the situation into account, especially if the conception of the situation includes a specification of the roles and available goals contained within it (see Argyle, Furnham & Graham, 1981). In what amounted to a self study (Forgas, Argyle & Ginsburg, 1979), we asked the 14 members of an established academic group, including ourselves, to rate each other on a number of descriptive adjective scales, and to do so separately for each of four situations. The members included senior and junior faculty and staff, advanced doctoral students, and first-year doctoral students. The four situations included morning coffee - an established social ritual, Friday afternoon seminars open only to the group, post-seminar sessions at the local pub, and parties at the home of a senior faculty member. The dimensions or personal features in terms of which we differentiated each other differed from one situation to the other, as most of us would expect. But more than that emerged: The dimensions by which we differentiated each other varied <u>within</u> a situation as a function of the statuses or role relationships of the peo-

ple. For example, in the informal party situation, the new students did not differentiate among the people in terms of ingratiation, but the faculty and senior doctoral students did. People did not differ among themselves in their ingratiation behavior toward the new students; therefore, that dimension of impression management was irrelevant to the new students as potential recipients. On the other hand, it was clearly relevant to the others, thanks in part to the ingratiating behavior of some of the new students. So, the personal qualities with regard to which people will attempt to cast impressions, and the personal qualities to which potential recipients will be attentive, will vary with both the situation and the role relationships within the situation. Therefore, to understand the impressions attempted and the impressions gained in an episode of action, we should understand the nature of the situation and of the role relationships it contains.

The example I just gave extends our approach by recommending a technical analysis of the situation, but it was conventional in its focus on personal qualities as the stuff about which impressions might be attempted and formed. A different matter about which impressions are created and managed is the relationship itself, especially the enduring relationship. And here, little if any work has been done within the impression management tradition. However, the opportunities are many. We know, for example, that observers gain impressions about the relationship between two people on the basis of how those people touch each other, gaze at each other, dress with respect to each other, and regulate their physical proximity to each other. Desmond Morris (1977, pp. 86-101) refers to the witting and unwitting signals by which we display personal bonds to the world as "tie-signs," and these often are very complex and very subtle - but nonetheless effectively communicative to other competent members of the culture. The extension of the impression management perspective

to the study of tie-signs strikes me as both useful and challenging, since it will reveal actions by which bonded people establish a context within which others will interact with them.

As an early step along that line, it would be valuable to ascertain the features of a relationship with respect to which the members might wish to create and manage impressions. This in turn requires knowledge of important features of various types of relationships as construed within the culture, since it is with regard to those culturally construed features that impressions will be attempted and formed. An important start in that direction has been made by Keith Davis and Michael Todd (in press). On the basis of several studies, they have developed an assessment scale which affords a specification of relational features of friendships and of romantic love relationships. Their work provides a foundation for identifying the features of relationships with respect to which a bonded pair will cast impressions and to which outsiders will be attentive. But even here, the actions by which the bond is indicated occur in specific situations, and those situations will have to be taken into account as part of the analysis of the impression management.

Impressions also are formed with respect to much more variable features of interpersonal life, but again, little empirical work has been done from an impression management perspective. For example, we usually are very sensitive to the amount of interest another person exhibits in what we're saying, and many of us are adept in giving the impression of reasonable interest and involvement in what another person is saying to us. We also are sensitive to signals that a conversational partner wants to leave, or that he is only committed to a brief conversation; and we're pretty good at creating such impressions ourselves.

How do we do it? To what are we sensitive? Once again, there are leads in the work of other people. Adam Kendon (1981), in a very interesting paper, has built upon some distinctions made by Erving Goffman and reviewed the ways in which interacting people display a commonality of readiness to engage in an interactional episode by their establishment and cooperative maintenance of particular postural, spatial and orientational arrangements. These "unofficial" actions are separate from the putatively intended and explicit actions which make up the official, main line of the interaction. Once again, the topic is ripe for research from an impression management perspective. But here, too, an understanding of the situational context would be essential for the analysis of impressions created through "unofficial" actions and movements.

In giving these examples, I have stressed the situated nature of the actions by which impressions are conveyed and the unavoidable necessity of taking the situation into account. But I also have implied that completed episodes of social interaction should be decomposed into detailed sequences in order to reveal the impression management processes. This in turn requires a permanent record of the episode, and that brings us to the issue of technology. In the past, permanent records of interaction episodes were difficult and costly to make, and it was reasonable to claim that social processes had to be inferred from input/output experiments. The portability and relative cheapness of video recording no longer allows that claim, and it is time that we turned to the direct, empirical examination of social processes, including processes of impression management. The use of video does present certain problems, including inundation by data, but nevertheless it is my view that it will prove to be as important to our field as microscopy in biology.

In summary of my remarks, I have suggested that impression management research should eschew its excessive reliance on input/output experiments

and a causal vocabulary. It should capitalize on its theoretical emphasis on observable social processes by recording completed episodes of action, analyzing the situations within which the episodes occurred, and decomposing the recorded episode into detailed, component sequences so as to discover the actual processes. Furthermore, the study of impression management should be expanded to include the management of impressions about relationships, about fluctuating states of feeling and about intention and willingness to interact. I emphasized the importance of situational analysis because it is likely to reveal the dimensions or features about which actors will try to cast impressions and to which potential recipients will be attentive, and it also will provide a needed link to cultural considerations. This move toward a direct examination of processes and an explicit examination of the context of action already is well under way in developmental linguistics, child development, microsociology, and European and British social psychology. It is emerging only very slowly in North American social psychology, but there are hopeful signs - and I think the best bet for a local breakthrough is in the impression management area, since the commitment to internal mechanisms is weakest within that framework and the emphasis on potentially observable social processes is greatest.

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APPENDIX 1

Features of Situations*

1. Goals and goal structure. These can be construed as accomplishments made available by a situation - or what might be called "affordances." The affordances of a situation will vary somewhat across the roles of that situation and the skills which people bring to it. The affordances often are interrelated, such that some are instrumental to others; affordances also can be mutually incompatible, or mutually independent. The relational network among the affordances constitutes the "goal structure." (See Ch. 4, Argyle et al., 1981.)

2. Rules. These are shared beliefs which guide actions in the situation and are differentially tied to the various roles. The rules regulate actions to facilitate goal accomplishment, and they may be prescriptive, proscriptive or permissive. They may be strongly or weakly tied to sanctions of varying severity.

3. Roles. Roles of a situation are interdependent and entail the rights, duties and obligations of the social position. Some roles are mutually exclusive, while others are compatible such that one person can perform several. Roles are related to goals and to rules.

4. Elements and sequences. Situations often contain characteristic actions and sequences; this is especially true of rituals and formal situations. Deviations from prescribed behavioral elements or sequences of actions may be quite noticeable.

5. Environmental setting. This includes physical and symbolic boundaries, props and such environmental features as temperature, color and humidity.

Additional features: Concepts, language and speech, and difficulties and skills.

Comments: These features are interdependent components which in combination constitute a situation. The approach has several conceptual problems but has demonstrated considerable research utility.

*Adapted from Argyle, M., Furnham, A., & Graham, J.A. Social Situations. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. Pp. 6-9.

APPENDIX 2

Basic Features of the Situated Action Paradigm*

1. The objective of social psychology is to understand and explain human action.

2. Human action is situated, and in order to understand an action it is necessary to understand the situation within which the action is known or believed to occur.

3. Human action is structured, both temporally and hierarchically. To understand an action, it usually is necessary to identify its temporal and hierarchical structure.

4. Human action is meaningful, but the meanings of actions are always modifiable by subsequent actions. The meanings of actions are best construed as implications for subsequent action and implications of prior actions, thereby linking an action to the past and the future.

5. Persons whose actions are of interest are active agents, subject to biological and social constraints. They operate from active, first-person perspectives of a continually present interval of reality which is partly specified and partly still specifiable. The active-agency perspective of each party, including the investigator, must be taken into account in attempting to understand an action. The adoption of a reflective, third-person perspective regarding oneself is an action in its own right.

6. Many actions of interest are joint actions produced as part of the coordinated activity of two or more people, and can only be understood as such. A person legitimately may be unaware of the reason for his action if that action actually is a "joint action."

7. The analysis of completed episodes of action is an important methodological aspect of the situated action paradigm.

8. The causal vocabulary of explanation is dropped in favor of the more inclusive vocabulary of part/whole description.

*Adapted from Ginsburg, G.P. Epilogue: A conception of situated action. In Brenner, M. The Structure of Action. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980. Pp. 313-350; and from Ginsburg, G.P. Psychology and the real world. Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, 1980, 10, 115-129.